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Not so straight: engaging same-sex-attracted students in Catholic secondary schools — an Australian study

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The high susceptibility of students with diverse sexualities to self-harm or suicide that has been widely established in the research literature could well be increased for students at Catholic high schools. In Australia, the Catholic Church discourages disclosure of other than a heterosexual identity for their teachers and also for students attending their high schools. The presumption of straight sexual identity and the effective exclusion of alternative sexual identities being expressed by staff and students in Catholic schools could be seen as a breach of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and, with respect to students, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in that GLBTIQ students suffer discrimination and denial of their human rights.

This article draws on the findings of a national consultation of Catholic secondary schools in Australia conducted in 2006, which sought to identify best practices for ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment for students with diverse sexualities. It situates that report in the context of international human rights, current best practice, and research on the sexual health and wellbeing of same-sex-attracted and gender-questioning young people.

Keywords: students, gay, education, sexuality, discrimination, Catholic

Introduction

The relationship between suicide risk and sexual orientation among adolescents has been well established in the research literature. For more than 20 years now, US government research (Feinleib 1989) has acknowledged that gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.

In Australia, suicide is the largest cause of death among 15–24 year olds (ABS 2015), with 1139 deaths recorded in 2013 and 348 being determined as suicide. The biggest increase in recent years in deaths from suicide has been in this age group. The increase

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began in the 1960s, with a sharp increase in the 1980s and 1990s, and peaked in 1997, when Australia recorded the highest youth suicide rate in industrialised countries. An early Australian study (Nicholas and Howard 1998) found that gay-identified young men aged 18–24 were three to seven times more likely to attempt suicide.

Studies published in the respected publication *Journal of Adolescent Health* have confirmed the greater risk faced by same-sex-attracted young people. Friedman et al (2006) found that gender-role nonconformity was associated with suicidality, and that bullying mediates that relationship. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that four protective factors — namely, family connectedness, teacher caring, other adult caring, and school safety — lessened the rate of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among school-age gay, lesbian and bisexual youth.

The more recent report from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society found that the ‘support of family, friends and, to a lesser extent, professionals was shown to lessen the destructive impacts of homophobia’, but, on the other hand, ‘almost a half of participants attended a school with no social or structural support features for sexual diversity’ (Hillier et al 2010, viii). That study found that of the 3134 survey respondents, those who mentioned religion in their answers ‘were more likely than others to feel bad about their same sex attraction and less likely to feel good’, and further they reported that ‘they received less support from parents, siblings and teachers when they disclosed their sexuality and they were more likely to report self-harm and suicidal thoughts’ (Hillier et al 2010, x).

Another recent Australian research report, *Growing Up Queer*, which addressed issues facing young Australians who are gender variant and sexuality diverse, found that ‘schools were identified as the major site in which homophobia and transphobia prevailed’ and that ‘the failure of some teachers to intervene in harassment and abuse, and/or directing homophobic and transphobic comments at students, was experienced as a violation of trust’ (Robinson et al 2014, v). That report found that ‘focus group and survey data suggest that teachers in government schools were more accepting and supportive than students, but that in religious affiliated schools students were more accepting and supportive than teachers’ (Robinson et al 2014, ix). With regard to sexuality education, ‘the majority of young people pointed out that the sex education in their schools primarily taught about heteronormative sexuality and reproduction’, and one young person pointed out that ‘things would have been better for them if there was better education in schools about queerness, not as something some other people are, but education that recognises that members of their audience are queer’ (Robinson et al 2014, 30).

Among the various religious groups that discourage disclosure of sexual diversity, the Catholic Church is significant both in relation to the absolute numbers of young people coming under its jurisdiction of educational, health and welfare programs and also in relation to the explicit moral teaching of that religious tradition that defines homosexual genital expression as 'intrinsically disordered'. The Catholic Catechism summarises the teaching of the Catholic Church in relation to homosexuality in these terms:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. [Catholic Catechism 1993, para 2357.]

In assessing sexuality education school policy for Australian gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (GLBTIQ) students, Jones and Hillier (2012, 437) suggested that 'at least one-tenth and perhaps over one-third of Australian students may find GLBTIQ-themed sexuality education personally relevant'. But in examining sex education policies in Australia, they identified Victoria as 'the most extreme ideological battleground in published school education policy texts ... [with] the most blatantly conservative Catholic policy that prohibits teaching around premarital sex, safe sex, body functions and individualism' (Catholic Education Office Melbourne 2001, 7–8).

Safe learning environments

The importance of establishing and maintaining a safe learning environment is critical to facilitating the intellectual challenge and personal growth of students. In Australia, there has been considerable attention given to the need to address bullying within schools (Rigby and Thomas 2002). Bullying has been shown to correlate to early school dropout and student self-harm.

So, establishing a safe and inclusive learning environment is a critical factor for secondary schools in particular. The National Safe Schools Framework was developed in Australia in 2003 with the support of the Department of Education, Science and Training. It established an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect. That framework reflects the fact that all state and territory government and non-government education authorities, and the Commonwealth, are committed to working together to ensure the wellbeing of all Australian students.

This National Safe Schools Framework (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003) aims to prevent and respond to bullying, harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect by the development of written policies, promoting whole-of-school approaches, professional staff development and training, and specialist support for teachers.

All secondary schools in Australia are expected to work within this national framework and to strive to provide an effective and accessible pastoral care program for their students, recognising the vulnerability of the students' lives as they move through the complex transition from childhood to adulthood. Many Catholic schools not only work well within the National Safe Schools Framework, but they can bring an additional body of principles, values and traditions that can add a new dimension to the guidelines presented in that framework.

Supporting the vision of this national framework has been the recent formation of the National Safe Schools Coalition, specifically focused on the safety and wellbeing of GLBTIQ students. Schools are invited to commit to membership, which involves working to create inclusive school communities that are free from homophobic bullying and discrimination. The Coalition is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training and involves a range of different schools, but it is of concern that it includes only a small number of Catholic secondary colleges.

Despite these supportive frameworks and the work of the Coalition, those assessing progress in this area report 'a steady increase in homophobic violence in schools over the past decade' (Jones and Hillier 2014, p 57). While it did not identify where such violence is most concentrated, it seems significant that the most recent report of the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society specifically recommended:

... advocating to government entities for the removal of exemptions for religious schools that currently exist in Australian anti-discrimination legislation at the state and national levels, so that the ethical obligation to provide a safe and supportive space for students with diverse sexualities cannot be so easily overlooked. [Hillier et al 2010, 56.]

Human rights covenants and obligations

There are significant and critically relevant human rights treaties and covenants that relate to the obligations of government and non-government educational authorities that undertake the education of young people in Australia today. These treaties specifically relate to the right to education and non-discrimination.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1966. This Covenant was founded on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which established the ideal of all human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want. The Covenant, however, proceeded to establish that such rights should be exercised 'without discrimination of any kind' (Art 2) and that in this regard 'special measures of protection and assistance should be taken on behalf of all children and young persons' (Art 10). The Covenant also upheld the right of everyone to education, noting that 'education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity' (Art 13).

Specifically in relation to the rights of students, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, upheld the view that the best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them (Art 3), that the child has the right to freedom of expression (Art 13), that the child has the right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence (Art 19), and, in relation to the right to education, it should be achieved on the basis of equal opportunity and in a fashion that respects the child's human dignity (Art 28).

Each of these sections of the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly applies to the circumstances of those young people with diverse sexualities or identifications. They should particularly apply to those young people whose development could be significantly impacted by the imposition of a discriminatory or exclusionary policy of education with regard to religious values or a dominant majority.

How best can we apply these principles of international human rights agreements and law in the context of sexual orientation and gender identity? A distinguished group of 29 human rights experts met in Indonesia in 2006 to consider this very topic, resulting in the Yogyakarta Principles (ICJ 2007). Their findings may well assist us in identifying how these human rights principles and agreements should apply to the operation of Australian educational systems and standards. The gathering upheld the duty 'to ensure equal access to education and equal treatment of students without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity' (Principle 16a) and to 'provide adequate protection for students, staff and teachers of different sexual orientations and gender identities against all forms of social exclusion and violence within the school environment, including bullying and harassment' (Principle 16e).

A 2015 consultation in Bangkok on school bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (UNESCO 2015) involved 100 delegates from the Asia Pacific region who met to identify examples of good practice in preventing and addressing bullying on the basis of diverse sexualities in educational institutions.

They highlighted educational models that could be shared across cultures and nationalities, where motivation and incentives can grow to develop more respectful and inclusive educational policies and practices.

Within Australia, these international treaties and covenants should be not only instructive but also directive in terms of the evolution and development of our national and state and territory legislation with respect to the welfare of young people and the proper provision of education and learning programs.

Regarding the provision of education by religious organisations, the fact that some religious bodies have worked hard to ensure that they have exemptions under national and state legislation on the grounds of what is often referred to as 'religious freedom' is significant in relation to the care and welfare of young people in religious-based schools. When seeking such exemptions, few religious organisations identify that, in protecting what is identified as religious freedom, they intend to deal with staff and students in a way that could seriously impact on their proper growth and development, their freedom of expression, and their sense of personal value and dignity if they are effectively denied the right to express the divergence of sexual identities that exist within any staff group or student community.

The exemptions that currently exist for such discrimination to take place within religious-affiliated educational institutions in Australia should be reviewed in the light of the rights of the child as established by United Nations and international human rights agreements and obligations, as well as the findings of recent research into the treatment and welfare of GLBTIQ students in Australia today — about one in five of whom is educated in the Catholic education system (ABS 2014 Schools Australia, Table 35a).

In order to assess the grounds for such a review, it is relevant to examine the findings of a national consultation (Norden 2006) examining the way in which the Catholic secondary school networks across the nation deal with the needs of same-sex-attracted students and young people with diverse sexualities.

Same-sex-attracted students

Students who are same-sex attracted represent a group of students within the secondary school context who have particular needs. These needs must be recognised and respected in order to enable these students to participate and fully engage in a safe school environment.

The recognition of those needs does not necessarily mean that the students themselves must in any way be publicly recognised or identified, through either their own actions or the actions of other students or members of staff.

But the recognition that there are same-sex-attracted students and students with diverse sexualities in every secondary school in Australia — and quite possibly in every classroom or sporting team or activity group — means that an environment is established that respects diversity and refuses to tolerate behaviour that communicates or perpetuates disrespect or ignorance.

The Catholic Church is presented with a serious challenge in addressing the issue of how their educational facilities give concrete expression to ‘inclusive education’ in relation to the presence of GLBTIQ students enrolled in their secondary colleges or high schools. Given the teaching of the Catholic Church that gay and lesbian students who give expression to their homosexual feelings are engaged in what is termed ‘intrinsically disordered’ behaviour, it is a challenge to see how such learning environments can be identified as inclusive in relation to the presence and developmental needs of same-sex-attracted students.

Inclusive education necessarily involves a real engagement with the diversity of needs and backgrounds of different students within a school community, as well as recognition, respect and understanding of the issues that they face during the critical years of their high school education.

The public concern about the impact of bullying behaviour within a school context that has developed in recent years does not appear to be uniformly matched with the same awareness or concern about the impact of such behaviour directed towards same-sex-attracted students. It is critically important that, as schools work to create a safe learning environment for students, there is a recognition that same-sex-attracted students are one of the most significant groups at risk of being bullied.

Catholic secondary schools represent a significant part of the Catholic Church’s ministry throughout all states and territories of Australia. The Catholic Church has major commitments to three main areas of ministry outside of the local parish ministry: health, education and welfare.

In undertaking these areas of ministry, the Catholic Church believes that it is important that its values and teachings are given clear expression in the planning and management of these services. These teachings have particular relevance to the experiences and expectations of same-sex-attracted students and students with diverse sexualities.

This ethos has been applied successfully when the challenge has been to respond to students dealing with either physical or intellectual disability and with students coming from a diverse range of cultural, religious and racial backgrounds.

But there is a challenge for church leaders and administrators in using this same Catholic school ethos in relation to the circumstances of same-sex-attracted students, if they wish their educational institutions to be seen to be inclusive and respectful of diversity and differences. As was found in an American study of Catholic schools (Maher and Sever 2007), Catholic identity has served both as a cause for and a barrier to addressing gay and lesbian issues in schools.

Two studies of homophobia in Canadian Catholic schools (Callaghan 2007; 2009) found that in that country there was a widespread common belief that Catholic schools were homophobic 'since that is simply a part of the Catholic faith'.

The Not So Straight (Norden 2006) national consultation sought to examine that proposition within Australia Catholic secondary schools. The findings have implications for schools that, by their discriminatory practices, could be seen to be in violation of human rights charters but regardless wish to continue to receive public funding.

National consultation

So, what do Catholic secondary schools throughout Australia do to increase the protective factors that have been found significant in preventing same-sex-attracted students contemplating or completing suicide? A national consultation was undertaken with a view to identifying 'good practice' in this area. The project built on an earlier consultation (Norden 2005; 2008) that identified good practice in Catholic secondary schools in response to incidents of illicit drug use by students.

In the completion of that earlier project dealing with illicit drug use, the principals of several of the Catholic secondary schools identified their concerns about how best to respond to the presence of same-sex-attracted students, some of whom had been involved in illicit drug use.

Consequently, a further consultation was undertaken with a view to focusing specifically on how the Catholic secondary school system could more effectively respond to students with diverse sexualities in an inclusive, accepting and pastorally effective way.

Research methodology

According to the latest statistics available (National Catholic Education Commission 2014), there were 335 Catholic secondary schools in Australia, with a total of 338,650 students enrolled and 26,494 teaching staff employed. These secondary schools were managed by centrally located Catholic Education Offices in metropolitan cities and regional centres across the country.

A small steering committee was established to advise the consultation for the project, including a senior policy adviser from one of the Catholic Education Offices; a national religious leader responsible for the management and administration of more than 30 secondary colleges; and an experienced consultant and researcher from outside of the Catholic Church network, who had extensive experience working as a consultant and adviser in this particular field.

This steering committee also guided the researcher in his commitment to ensure the protection of ethical principles in carrying out the national consultation. Staff consulted were involved on a voluntary basis, and were assured of confidentiality, both in relation to individuals and the institution to which they were attached. Ethical guidelines indicated that current secondary students would not be individually consulted or interviewed as part of the consultation.

In designing the methodology for this national consultation, it was considered important to engage a representative sample of senior staff both from the Catholic Education Offices and from a substantial number of individual secondary schools in different parts of the country. In selecting a sample of secondary colleges, it was important that they be representative of different parts of Australia and of both larger metropolitan cities and regional and rural localities.

The principals of the Catholic secondary schools contacted were enthusiastic about contributing to the national consultation and in each case identified their need for resource material and guidelines that reflected Catholic moral values and pastoral principles in responding to the needs of same-sex-attracted students in their schools. They had been chosen, following the recommendations of the steering committee members, as being educational leaders whose school had knowledge and experience to contribute to the study. More than 40 principals were consulted as part of the project.

In addition to staff from Catholic secondary schools in each state and territory of Australia, key personnel working in several Catholic Education Offices were consulted as part of the research task. In all, 15 senior staff were consulted from Catholic Education Offices. Their role was either that of a senior administrator or

senior policy adviser, generally covering the area of curriculum development or pastoral care services.

The consultant gathered and scrutinised all relevant documentation in relation to the pastoral care of students in Catholic schools and any policy documents that specifically dealt with sex education and the need to express tolerance in the face of diversity of sexual identity or behaviour.

In addition to the principals consulted, a further group of 12 senior teaching and administrative staff participated in the national consultation. The perspective of those working directly with students was seen to be important in complementing the views of the principals themselves. Fifteen welfare staff or welfare coordinators also met with the consultant as part of this project.

Ethical considerations prevented the consultant from interviewing students currently enrolled in Catholic schools. Instead, 12 recent graduates of Catholic secondary schools contributed to the consultation, reflecting on their experience of how their secondary schools responded, or failed to respond, to this issue in their lives and in the lives of their fellow students. These former students were volunteers and were also assured that their identities and their former schools would remain confidential.

The consultant did not use standardised survey forms, since the circumstances in each state and territory varied so much and the issues were different for senior policy staff, school principals, welfare staff and former students. In most cases, the consultant met directly with the individuals concerned; in some cases, it was necessary to limit the interview to telephone contact because of distance and time limitations.

In each case, the information that was sought included policies, procedures, programs and curriculum either from within the Catholic Education Offices or from within a Catholic secondary school that could be regarded as 'good practice' in responding to the needs of students with diverse sexualities.

Four areas were explored with each of those participating in the consultation, including pastoral care, staff development and training, school curriculum and resources, and the development of an inclusive school culture.

Participation in the national consultation was purely voluntary, and staff members who had concerns about participating were under no obligation to take part.

Findings of the consultation

The key issues that emerged from the consultation were identified from the key document analysis and the personal interviews conducted by the consultant with staff of Catholic Education Offices, school principals and senior school staff, and recent graduates from Catholic secondary schools around the country.

Twenty-one recommendations were formulated in the research report relating to pastoral care and welfare and counselling services, staff development and training, school curriculum and resources, and the fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture.

These recommendations were presented to each of the Diocesan Catholic Education Offices and to the relevant church authorities within each diocese or archdiocese throughout the country. The consultant proceeded to conduct in-service training workshops based on the findings of the report to Catholic secondary principals in all larger dioceses throughout the country, except in the Archdiocese of Melbourne — the largest diocese in the country — where its use was forbidden.

Pastoral care

Throughout Australia, pastoral care generally was found to be an area of high priority for Catholic schools. It is seen as a critical performance area in fulfilling both the educational and the formation goals of Catholic education. Students whose aim it was to reach high academic standards were also challenged and supported to deal with the developmental challenges and tasks of adolescence. Graduates of Catholic secondary schools were thought to be more effective witnesses of Christian faith and values in the wider society only if they were rounded persons, able to deal with diversity and change.

Pastoral care and counselling in relation to the issue of same-sex-attracted students was often seen as just as much an issue for those students perceived as 'straight' as for students for whom their developing alternative sexual orientation was a personal issue.

However, senior training staff from Catholic Education Offices were, in the main, found to be very uncertain about how to advise, support and supervise school-based counsellors in relation to balancing church teaching and their commitment to providing good pastoral care for all students.

The lack of clear guidance and support emerged as an area of high need for pastoral care staff and school counsellors dealing with the needs of same-sex-attracted students.

A coordinator of counselling services from within a major Catholic Education Office warned that as students increase their willingness in coming years to identify themselves within the school environment as same-sex attracted, there may be a backlash from central church authorities wishing to impose controls preventing sexual diversity from being openly identified within a Catholic Church educational institution.

One senior school counsellor at a boys-only school in Melbourne indicated that about two new students a month would present same-sex attraction as an issue in a counselling setting at his school. That counsellor reported:

Our single sex student environment certainly lessens the opportunity to discuss the issue in the run of normal interactions and associations. It is important to identify the dominant culture and there can be a destructive dimension to that dominant culture in a single-sex, male-only school. [Norden 2006, 34.]

Many counselling staff reported that some same-sex-attracted students wanted assistance with resolving the sense of guilt or shame they felt in the face of what they understood to be Church condemnation of homosexuality itself. Students who were struggling with this conflict were often the students identified as dealing with depression and poor self-esteem.

Senior training staff within Catholic Education Offices were, in the main, very uncertain about how to advise, support and supervise school-based counsellors in relation to balancing church moral teaching and their commitment to providing good pastoral care for all students.

Staff development and training

Across the country, there was wide variation with regard to the provision of resources for staff development training made available from the Catholic Education Offices, depending largely on the identity of the local church authority.

Most of these central offices had developed excellent guidelines for pastoral care of students that focused on providing caring and secure environments and fostering life-giving relationships (Catholic Education Office, Sydney 2003), or on building a sense of security, trust and inclusiveness (Catholic Education Office, NSW 2003).

Some dioceses (Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta 2005) had policies and programs for sex education and development, within which the needs of same-sex-attracted students were specifically mentioned.

But, in most dioceses, the issue of same-sex-attracted students in Catholic schools did not appear to be mentioned at all. In fact, in some dioceses, there appeared to be a glaring absence of current guidelines or programs in relation to sex education generally, which was the case in the Melbourne Archdiocese at the time.

This national consultation of the Catholic secondary school network found that in the area of staff development and training, despite the availability of excellent guidelines for pastoral care of students, there appeared to be a general hesitation to deal with this issue and that staff often felt most ill-equipped when students sought guidance or assistance in classroom discussion and religious education classes.

Staff and most students had clear understanding of the Catholic Church's moral teaching about homosexual behaviour, but they expressed the need for focus on the interface between the church's moral teaching and its pastoral practice. Many identified that the key challenge they faced was how to faithfully give expression to the church's teaching and moral values in the light of discrimination and aggressive or insulting behaviour directed towards same-sex-attracted students or staff.

Staff often reported a conflict between, on the one hand, the emphasis within Catholic schools on respect for the person, a belief that all human life is valued, and the importance of an inclusive community, and, on the other hand, how same-sex-attracted people felt in the face of the church's teaching, or the treatment they sometimes received from other students, or even teaching staff, at Catholic schools. Individual staff members, including the school counsellor or year-level coordinators, were often the crusaders in this area. But, in several schools consulted, it was reported that there were staff members who remained resistant and sometimes aggressively opposed to engaging in any form of in-service training programs addressing this difficult area.

An American study (Maher and Sever 2007) found that a lack of support from school administration in Catholic high schools was a significant barrier to increased inclusivity for same-sex-attracted students. There was a significant fear of community reaction, particularly from parents with high levels of anxiety about students 'coming out' in their schools.

It was clear that this fearful resistance or defensiveness would have a negative impact on the lives of vulnerable young people who needed professional assistance in dealing with issues of sexual identity in these educational institutions.

School curriculum and resources

In the Not So Straight national consultation (Norden 2006), school curriculum was one of the critical areas identified for bringing about change within the Catholic school environment.

Schools had addressed the issue of bullying in many and varied ways, but the school curriculum enabled this issue to be dealt with in a manner that was integrated into the everyday learning environment of all students. Most schools now recognise that dealing with bullying only in the disciplinary area of school life limited the school's response as a reactive response.

Instead, the issues of homophobia and sexual diversity were seen to be most successfully dealt with in the school environment when they were included as part of a broader anti-bullying program and integrated into the teaching curriculum itself.

One school included in its list of behaviours under its anti-bullying and harassment policy name calling, teasing or exclusion, spreading rumours, and making negative or offensive comments about another's perceived sexuality, race, appearance or interests (Norden 2006, 38).

One Year 11 form master reported an example of correcting inappropriate behaviour while on yard duty:

Three senior students were clowning around in the student lunchroom during recess one morning. I overheard one of them say to the other two: 'You're just faggots, just stupid faggots, you are.' Approaching the group, I said to them: 'How do you think your language might affect other students in the vicinity who might take offence?' The student defended his remark in a jovial way, saying: 'Oh Sir, we were just clowning around, we weren't serious.' I replied: 'Think about how a student who was uncertain about his or her sexuality might respond to hearing the three of you use that term as a put down for another person.' The students replied: 'Oh sorry Sir, we hadn't intended any harm to anyone.' 'I know,' I replied, 'but if we are serious about creating a safe and respectful place for all students, that sort of remark could in fact be quite hurtful for some.' The fact that this sort of behaviour had been mentioned in our recent staff development forum gave me a little more confidence in intervening, which previously I don't think I would have been prepared to do. [Norden 2006, 49.]

While information about heterosexual relationships was widely available to young people, with regard to same-sex relationships, within a Catholic environment, it was reported to the consultant that few received information from school or family. This left them to rely instead on friends, the media and the internet.

Catholic school administrators generally reported an uncertainty about making available material in school libraries that dealt with sexual diversity or homosexuality. It was even suggested by some that to implement anti-homophobic education might be seen as promoting homosexuality.

But, as the Australian Institute in Canberra explained:

Anti-homophobic education is not about promoting homosexuality, but about acknowledging the reality of the existence and relevance of homosexuality, in the same way that schools acknowledge the reality of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Adopting anti-homophobic policies and curricula is about student safety and students' right to a respectful and supportive learning environment. [Flood and Hamilton 2005, 14.]

Inclusive school culture

The final area where many Catholic secondary schools were found to be taking constructive steps forward was the fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture.

The development of an inclusive school culture requires the collaboration of a broad range of stakeholders. These include not only the school principal as a central facilitator and leader, his or her teaching staff, parents and students, but also the administrators of the school.

In order to further enhance the development of an inclusive approach within Catholic secondary education, it was seen as important to emphasise three components of effective school administration: a clear articulation of values; the development of policy emanating from those values; and the implementation of policy in a way that can be clearly seen as giving expression to those values.

These principles become critical in shaping an inclusive school culture when in every class group of students there will be two or three students who will be questioning or pre-occupied with their sexual identity.

One Catholic secondary school managed by the Sisters of Mercy, and located in a rural community, reported to the consultant how they had dealt with their special

needs given the impact of their geographical location. This included the lack of local support groups and the absence of role modelling of sexual diversity from within their local community. With the support of the Mercy Sister principal, the school embarked on an awareness-raising exercise, focusing on 'celebrating diversity'. This program involved in-service staff training with the Equal Opportunity Commissioner, the training of a senior group of students who acted as mentors for inclusive behaviour, and the shaping of an Ash Wednesday Prayer Service, which had a focus on those who had been discriminated against in their school community, including GLBTIQ students.

Eleven case studies and 21 recommendations were presented (Norden 2006) for consideration by the 340 Catholic secondary principals in their in-service training programs across the country. The consultant proceeded to conduct such workshops for more than 250 of these senior educational staff in the 12 months following the completion of the national consultation (February–November 2007).

An integrated approach

This national consultation found that the schools that were confidently working in this area were those that had brought about an integration of the above four levels of intervention.

If the commitment to the needs of at-risk or marginal students rested with the student counsellor or welfare officer alone, or if there was a core group of teaching staff who actively resisted the implementation of an inclusive school policy, the school's response remained fragmented.

The role of the school principal was found to be critical to the implementation of an integrated response, but he or she needed the support of the school board and looked to the support of senior staff from the Catholic Education Office.

The experience of presenting the findings of the national consultation to Catholic secondary principals in their staff development training days in 16 regions of Australia highlighted some of the strengths and some of the glaring weaknesses of the Catholic Education System in responding to the needs of same-sex attraction. More than 250 of the total of 350 Catholic secondary principals took part in these in-service training workshops provided by the consultant. As reported earlier, none were permitted within the Melbourne Archdiocese, where concern was expressed about 'promoting a gay lifestyle'.

As was found in a study by Kirkley and Getz (2007) at a religiously affiliated university, the most effective approach was one that both gave expression to the university's mission and values and, at the same time, promoted respect for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals.

Evidence of homophobia and denial

Overall, the report, along with its 21 recommendations, was warmly received by senior Catholic Church leaders throughout Australia. On the basis of the report, the author was invited to present staff development workshops on the report's findings to secondary principals in most dioceses of Australia.

However, upon interviewing senior staff from the Catholic Education Offices in different parts of Australia, it was clear to the researcher that an air of uncertainty and insecurity existed in dealing generally with the area of sex education and, in particular, with the topic of homosexuality in Catholic secondary school programs.

With few exceptions around the nation, this uncertainty seemed to be founded on the lack of clear direction provided by senior church leaders. One senior educational administrator indicated that his local church leader 'would not be prepared even to accept that a proportion of our young people do not have a heterosexual orientation'. A recent British study of bullying of lesbian and gay youth identified denial as a barrier to addressing oppressive behaviour: 'Because communities think they don't exist, they don't feel they need to provide services or protections' (Mishna et al 2009, 1604).

The critical concern from some church leaders was not that effective pastoral care programs be established in their secondary schools, but that the Church's fundamental position on sexual morality be clearly articulated and presented and that all students in Catholic schools be encouraged to strive to act in ways that are conforming to this code of sexual morality.

The moral teaching referred to is that only in the marital relationship can the use of the sexual faculty be morally good and that homosexual expression is intrinsically disordered.

The consultation found evidence of attempts to support this position by reinterpreting the widely acknowledged research finding that there is a higher than average positive correlation between self-harm and same-sex-attracted young people. This widely established phenomenon was not readily acknowledged by some senior church

authorities. Instead, they preferred to uphold the ideal of abstention from sexual behaviour as the safest way of avoiding self-harm.

A key research article quoted in the report (Norden 2006, 28) dealing with this issue found that young gay men were at significantly 'increased risk of suicide symptoms [and] of reoccurring depression, with symptom onset occurring, on average, during early adolescence' (Cochrane and Mays 2000, 573). The study concluded that this research 'provides further evidence that adolescence may be a particularly difficult time for young gay men' (Cochrane and Mays 2000, 577).

The concern, which exists in some regions of the Australian Catholic Church, that the presence of same-sex-attracted students should not be publicly acknowledged and recognised in any way can only be legitimately upheld if the risk factor for such students attempting self-harm can be denied or suppressed in some way. For this reason, the Cochrane and Mays article quoted in the national consultation report (Norden 2006) attracted critical comments from one senior church leader. It is therefore important to clearly outline the findings of this research.

Cochrane and Mays demonstrated that gays attempt suicide at a rate 5.36 times greater than sexually active heterosexuals, whereas 'male virgins' (those who reported no experience of sexual intercourse) attempt suicide at a rate 0.28 times as often as heterosexuals.

One interpretation of this research finding could be that Cochrane and Mays found that gays were 19.1 times more likely to attempt suicide than virgins, controlled for income and education. Such an approach could conclude that it is not homosexual orientation or same-sex attraction that is correlated with a high incidence of suicide; rather, it is engaging in sexual activity with members of the same sex. It is therefore important to clarify what the findings of this research actually were.

Cochrane and Mays' study involved a final sample of 3648 men between the ages of 17 and 39 years. Of the cohort of males aged 17–19 years who were interviewed, 9.1 per cent indicated experience of sexual intercourse with males, 8.8 per cent indicated experience of sexual intercourse with females only, and a large 58.8 per cent indicated that they had no experience of sexual intercourse. Overall, their study classified individuals into three categories: no sexual partners (n=187), female sex partners only (n=3208), and any male sexual partners (n=108).

It is not credible to suggest that abstention from sexual intercourse was found by Cochrane and Mays to be significant in reducing the risk of self-harm or suicide. To suggest that abstention from any form of sexual activity before marriage is the

solution for Catholic secondary students is not acceptable as an effective pastoral strategy, in the face of the well-researched and confirmed sexual activity of Australian school students.

Relevant to the application of this research to the Australian context, the fifth national survey of the sexual health of secondary school students (ARCSHS 2014) reported on interviews with more than 2000 Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 students from state, Catholic and independent schools about their sexual experience.

The results showed that the majority of students (69 per cent) had experienced some form of sexual activity, that 34 per cent had experienced sexual intercourse, that around 40 per cent had experienced oral sex, and that almost one-quarter of sexually active students (23 per cent) had experienced sex with three or more people in the past year. The majority of the sample, 83 per cent of young men and 76 per cent of young women, reported sexual attraction only to people of the opposite sex, leaving a significant percentage of students reporting active same-sex experience.

While some church leaders might hope that young people would refrain from sexual activity while at secondary school, this national Australian research indicates that many in fact do not abstain. Their denial of the presence of diverse sexualities in Catholic secondary schools also seems to be challenged by these survey results.

Considering this situation, it would appear that an approach that would like to remain in denial about adolescent sexual activity and the presence of same-sex-attracted students in Catholic schools reflects some aspects of homophobia. Such a perspective also has serious implications for the capacity of the national network of Catholic secondary schools to achieve an inclusive level of education.

The Not So Straight consultation (Norden 2006) confronted evidence of such an approach in more than one location in Australia. It is clearly at odds with the evidence supported by the reality of the lives of the young people, including the 20 per cent of Australian secondary students who are enrolled in Catholic secondary schools across the country.

It is simply not honest to deny the presence of same-sex-attracted students in these secondary schools or to simply propose that complete abstinence from sexual activity would reduce the identified suicide risk for students with diverse sexualities.

Given the high correlation that has been widely established between serious self-harm, suicide and attempted suicide with young people with a same-sex attraction (Hillier et al 2010), one must wonder about the legal fulfilment of the Catholic

Church's duty of care in the administration of Catholic secondary schools in some parts of Australia.

Conclusions

The Not So Straight consultation (Norden 2006) identified some of the nation's best practice, and also some elements of worst practice in the Catholic secondary school network, in responding to the needs of same-sex-attracted students and young people with diverse sexualities.

The strengths observed included the high level of commitment to the pastoral care of students and the value base from which this pastoral base is founded: namely, recognising the value and dignity of each individual, especially in those secondary schools that had developed an integrated, multidimensional approach.

The weaknesses included the obvious anxiety of some senior church leaders and the fear and intimidation experienced by senior educational administrators and principals of Catholic secondary schools in seeking to strike a balance between the clearly stated church moral teaching and a respectful and compassionate pastoral response to the presence of gay and lesbian students and members of staff.

Some church leaders would prefer to imagine that same-sex-attracted students are not present in their educational facilities or, if they are present, that they are not sexually active. Such an approach would serious question whether such Catholic schools could be regarded as inclusive and respectful of diversity, in keeping with the expectations of the National Safe Schools Framework.

These findings also raise the critical question of whether schools or educational networks that are seen to be in violation of human rights charters, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that fail to implement programs of inclusive education, should continue to receive public funding or to retain exemptions under state and federal human rights legislation.

In light of the continuing high level of youth suicide among young Australians, this study concludes that the Catholic educational system faces a serious challenge to fulfil its duty of care and to be a leader in providing a safe, diverse and respectful learning environment for all of its students, including those who are same-sex attracted. ●

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